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CHOIR-BOYS IN CATHOLIC CHURCHES

By H. T. HENRY

IT is the woman's soothing voice that mankind wants and needs." With these rhythmically soothing words an American daily newspaper concluded its editorial appreciation of a Roman decision which appeared to relax the stringent legislation, found in the famous *Motu Proprio* of Pius the Tenth, excluding women from the choir at solemn liturgical functions in Catholic churches.

Whatever view may be taken of the legislation in question or of the subsequent Roman Brief which answered a query as to its exact meaning, certain it is that the soothing quality of woman's voice on the nerves of the Tired Business Man did not enter even faintly into the considerations that shaped the decision thus applauded by the editor. Needless to add, the original legislation excluding women from the choir was not dictated by any opposite desire to have that kind of boy's voice which stimulates the nerves or (as some might say) unduly excites them. One is reminded here of the anecdote contributed to a French magazine in a *causerie musicale* of M. Gastoué. "I recall," said that eminent musician, "a cruel but just answer made recently by one of our zealous confrères, the choirmaster of a basilica frequented by pilgrimages, in answer to an objection against the uninspiring character of the music performed under his direction. His music, it seems, did not 'excite the nerves enough'—in other words, it was too religious for church-music. He replied: 'Well, my dear sir, when one wishes his nerves excited, he does not go to church.'"

It is equally certain that the Congregation of Sacred Rites, which has rendered the decision or interpretation of the previous legislation, would not at all agree with the American editor's other comment that "under the new order the masses will be more impressively rendered, the offertories will be more appealing and the recessionals more of a benediction than when only male voices were in the choir." Even a superficial reading of the *Motu Proprio* would have saved the editor from such an ill-formed estimate of the reason for a benign interpretation of the existing

Church law on the subject of women in the choir. For it is a common impression that the voices of women are not well adapted for singing the Gregorian Chant; and yet the *Motu Proprio* had declared that no solemn celebration in which Gregorian Chant alone is used should be esteemed to have lost thereby any of its dignity or of its esthetically satisfying quality.

The comments of the editor have been dwelt upon here somewhat at length, because they represent fairly well a common but mistaken estimate of the function of music in the liturgy of the Catholic Church. If the world of thoughtful music-lovers may ever hope to understand aright the attitude of the Church to the whole subject of sacred music, emphasis must be laid on the fact that Catholic authorities look on the question of ecclesiastical music from two standpoints. They consider, first of all, the spirit and traditions of that liturgy in which music, it is true, plays so prominent a part. This spirit and these ancient traditions are not merely first in the order of consideration, but they are also supreme in directive power. Only secondarily does the artistic or esthetic side of music come under review. This is not to say that the Church is content with inferior musical compositions or renditions, however; for the whole context and spirit of the *Motu Proprio* must be interpreted in a directly opposite light, since it sets up a high artistic standard, insists upon its maintenance, and even goes to the length of indicating the means and instrumentalities for most effectively achieving and maintaining the standard.

The important lesson to be drawn from all this is that, because of the supreme character of the liturgical requirements, the authorities will not readily lend an ear to counsels of expediency in the sphere of ecclesiastical music. They will narrowly scrutinize the arguments put forth in support of any plea in derogation of the liturgical standard of propriety. They will not admit the correctness of any general declaration that the voices of boys are not good substitutes for those of women, or that the proper disciplining of the boys is a task beyond the competency of a choirmaster. Still less, of course, will they listen to the wholly uninformed choirmasters who say that the voices of boys are not "high" enough for soprano parts, or "low" enough for alto parts. For well-instructed church-musicians know the history of the employment of boys' voices from most ancient times down even to the present day. And the Church knows its own traditions, venerable and artistic alike, in this matter. It knows the present practice, both without and within its own communion, and the witness which this practice cheerfully bears to the feasibility of

organizing and maintaining choirs of men and boys, and to the artistic excellence of the musical renditions of well-trained choir-boys.

What the authorities of the Church do admit is that there may be certain circumstances, in certain localities, that will justify the use of women's voices in the choir at solemn liturgical functions. In thus tolerating the employment of these voices, the Church does not really relax her general rule of action, but grants an exception to that rule. Meanwhile, the rule itself is not based on any poor estimate of the artistic efficiency of the ladies, or on any criticism of their voices, or of their piety, or of their spirit of reverence. Neither has it any reference to questions of relative cheapness or expensiveness of the various kinds of choirs.

It is not to be denied that, under the several heads thus briefly catalogued, a pastor or a choirmaster may find much matter for discussion and for definite lead and guidance to a correct or to an incorrect decision, liturgically or artistically, as to the kind of choir he will have. And much white paper could be profitably subjected to printer's ink in reply to the various arguments that could be urged against the employment of choir-boys for the rendition of truly artistic ecclesiastical music. Briefly, however, the objections may be considered as centering around two points. Can "boy-choirs" be easily organized and properly maintained? To this point one may reply as the philosopher of old replied to a similar difficulty: *Solvitur ambulando*. Just go ahead and try; and if you have proper knowledge of the musical capabilities of the boy-voice and have taken the trouble to qualify as an organizer, you will succeed, as so many like you have succeeded, in organizing and maintaining excellent "boy-choirs." The present writer could fill several pages with modern instances, and might be permitted to answer the querulous objector: *Si monumenta quæras, circumspice*. The other point concerns the artistic capabilities of boys, not theoretically, but practically considered. Their voices "break" so soon, their emotions have not felt the expanding and intensifying experiences of life and therefore are not good bases for artistic expression, their propensity for flattening is so pronounced, and so on. Chapters of a book might be written about each one of these difficulties. Can we therefore reasonably look for consistently good renditions of good music by choir-boys? In reply, we may fairly enough say: *Contra factum non valet argumentum*. For indeed, with respect to all such argumentation, the best answer must simply be the experience of those who, competent and zealous for their task, have successfully

trained and do now successfully manage choirs of boys and men. One can, indeed, point to many failures, but we may surmise that these failures should be laid at the doors rather of the choirmaster than of the choir. *Sicut rex, ita grex*. We have to depend most largely, after all, on the man behind the gun.

By this excursus into the field of the theoretical and the practical questions relating to choir-boys, we have strayed from the purpose of the present paper; for the position of choir-boys in Catholic churches, while it may be properly defended by arguments similar to those which choirmasters of other churches would employ, is concerned less with questions of artistic than of liturgical propriety. Let us briefly indicate the ecclesiastical regulations on this matter, and the basis on which they rest.

The "Instruction on Sacred Music," commonly styled the "Motu Proprio," promulgated by Pius the Tenth (22 November, 1903) says (Nos. 12 and 13):

Except the chant of the celebrant and the sacred ministers at the altar . . . the rest of the liturgical singing belongs properly to the choir of clerics; wherefore singers in church, if they are laymen, are the substitutes of the ecclesiastical choir. . . .

It follows from the same principle that the *singers in church have a really liturgical office*, and that therefore *women, being incapable of such an office, cannot be admitted to the choir*. If high voices, such as treble and alto, are wanted, these parts must be sung by boys, *according to the ancient custom of the Church*.

The legislation seems to be pretty clear, especially those portions of it upon which we have ventured to bestow underlinings. And it is also quite obvious that in this legislation no reflection is cast upon the artistic capabilities of women, upon the quality—soothing or exciting—of their voices, or upon the spirit of reverence with which they would voice the praises of God. Finally, the ancient custom of the Church is invoked, partly as an illustration of the liturgical spirit, and perhaps partly in deprecation of unwise or misunderstanding criticism of this "new" legislation.

There has been much discussion, and very much misapprehension, of the various laws and regulations set forth in the Motu Proprio. Especially is this true of the question of Gregorian Chant, about which there has been not a little rather ludicrous misunderstanding. In general, however, the document was accepted in theory as an excellent Code of Liturgical Music Legislation. But the storm-centre of argumentation was the question of replacing the voices of women by those of boys. Here the discussion was hardly confined within the bounds of due reverence for

the legislation of the Church, for adverse criticism was passed on the very theory, or at least the implications of the theory, on which this particular legislation was based. The practical side of the matter, of course, came in for the largest share of unquiet animadversion.

It is unnecessary to review the discussion in this place. Suffice it to say that, as usual, much of the dissent was based on misapprehension. It was loudly proclaimed that women were generally more pious than men, that they alone could take the higher parts in good musical compositions, that they were more tractable than either men or boys, that they were simply necessary under the present financial and other conditions of many of our parishes, that the "choir" referred to was architecturally a portion of, or immediately adjacent to, the sanctuary and therefore was not the "choir" such as we understand that portion of the gallery (the most remote part of a church from the altar and sanctuary) devoted to the singers in English-speaking lands—and so on. With respect to the last-mentioned point, it is sufficient to say that it was based on a misapprehension. The *Motu Proprio* was originally written in Italian, and used the expression *cappella musicale*. In the Latin translation, this was rendered by "chorus"—an ambiguous word when finally turned into the English word "choir," since "choir" may refer either to a body of singers or to an architectural location of the church (*i. e.*, the sanctuary).

Finally, in order if possible to close a wearisome discussion that seemed merely to darken counsel, a *dubium* was submitted to the Congregation of Sacred Rites, explaining choir conditions in America and asking whether, in view of these conditions, women might be permitted as heretofore in our choirs. The reply of the Congregation has been variously interpreted, but in general it is thought that it permits the use of women's voices provided that the men be completely separated from the women, forming two distinct bodies of singers, although close enough, of course, to permit of effective choral renditions. It seems hardly necessary to enter here into the further question whether this permission is to be construed as an exception under the general law or as a partial abrogation of it.

Worthy of special emphasis, nevertheless, is the fact that, despite many untoward conditions of the musical status of various parishes, "boy-choirs" which had been introduced under the legislation of the *Motu Proprio* still continue to exist and to flourish in our churches under the apparent relaxation of the rules (as the Brief of the Sacred Congregation of Rites has been interpreted by

many choirmasters). And the pastor of one parish which can offer but scanty material for "boy-choir" training has declared his intention of never returning to the "mixed choir" of men and women which had previously conferred upon his church the highest distinction as "the best Catholic choir" in the city. The pastor is a man of taste and discernment. But he is favored highly in the possession of a choirmaster who is also a man of taste and discernment, of very great competency in his profession as a choirmaster, of generous zeal in the cause of good church music, and of noted ability as a composer of music. It would appear that the whole vexed and vexing question of "choir-boys" resolves itself into the old proverbial wisdom: "Where there's a will, there's a way."